

Occurrence and eradication of a small population of the Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* in Darwin

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Darwin is unique among Australian cities in only having one established feral bird species, the Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*). However there have been instances of the arrival of individuals or small groups of Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) and House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), which have failed to establish resident populations. This note reports on the discovery and attempted eradication of a small group of Eurasian Tree Sparrow in Darwin in 1998.

The Eurasian Tree Sparrow is widely distributed throughout Europe and Asia and is commonly associated with human activities, especially in the eastern part of its range. It has been introduced into the USA, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and New Zealand (Clement *et al.* 1993). The species was first recorded in Borneo in 1964, where it is believed to have arrived by steamer either from Hong Kong or Singapore (Smythies 1981). The closest permanent population to Darwin is the Indonesian island of Ambon, 1000 km to the north. Eurasian Tree Sparrows were released in Melbourne in 1863, but have remained confined to south-eastern Australia (Pizzey 1991).

In the Northern Territory, single specimens of Eurasian Tree Sparrow have been recorded at Darwin Airport (1983), Stokes Hill Wharf (1966) and Groote Eylandt (1991) (MAGNT 1998), which were probably accidental introductions from south-east Asia. Pairs of House Sparrows were recorded at the Darwin suburbs of Palmerston (1992) and Stuart Park (1992) after having arrived by road transport (D. Scammell, pers. comm. 1998).

On 23 January 1998, the Parks & Wildlife Commission were alerted to the presence of Eurasian Tree Sparrows in the harbourside suburb of Cullen Bay. This outbreak was considered to be serious, as an adult pair had already produced three fledglings by this time. Steps were therefore taken to eradicate the birds.

Control methods available were confined to netting, trapping and poisoning, as permission to use firearms loaded with rat shot could not be obtained. Observation of movements and eating habits were made over a four week period and a nest and four eggs were found. A 10 x 3 metre mist net was erected at dawn across regular flight paths used by the birds but they easily avoided the net. A sparrow 'maze' trap and a



Plate 2. Eurasian Tree Sparrow at Cullen Bay feeding from seed bowl with Double-Barred Finch. (Photo: Steve Chapman)

basic box and stick trap were baited and placed in areas regularly frequented by the sparrows, but this was unsuccessful.

The discovery of bird-feeding and watering bowls maintained by one of the local businesses and used by the sparrows provided the perfect opportunity to use seed soaked in a lethal dose of sedative. A bait of 250 ml budgie seed mix, 75 ml Alpha Chloralose, 35 ml water, and 35 ml Glycol was prepared. These were mixed to form a creamy paste, spread out on a board and left to dry overnight.

To avoid poisoning non-target species, a watch was established on the feed bowl and native birds flushed away. The three immature sparrows ingested a lethal dose and were easily collected using a scoop net. One mature sparrow, visibly suffering from the effects of the sedative, was also captured. The four bird carcasses and four eggs have

been lodged with the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

The remaining adult bird evaded capture. This proved to be fortuitous, as it has since occasionally been joined by other Eurasian Tree Sparrows, that have presumably arrived in Darwin aboard ships. These arrivals are reported to the Parks and Wildlife Commission by an aware public and can be quickly eradicated.

References

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Northern Territory Naturalist (2000) 16: 34-35

Unusual predator avoidance behaviour by a Peaceful Dove *Geopelia striata*

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Predator avoidance strategies by members of the pigeon family (Columbidae) are known to include remaining motionless or flying directly to the closest branch or vegetation (Marchant & Higgins 1993), or rapid straight flight when being pursued in the open (pers obs). However, on the 25th August 1997, I observed a very unusual strategy adopted by a Peaceful Dove (*Geopelia striata*) when pursued by an Australia Hobby (*Falco longipennis*).

The observations were made at a small muddy waterhole on the Buffalo Farm (12° 47' S 132° 35' E) in Kakadu National Park. This area is comprised of savanna open forest and woodland, with open woodland and stands of *Melaleuca* spp. on the poorly drained flats. Hearing a commotion in the Yellow-barked Paperbark *Melaleuca nervosa* bordering the waterhole, I observed an Australian Hobby darting around and crashing in and out of the canopy of the Melaleucas, chasing a small bird. After some time, the pursued bird was identified as a Peaceful Dove, which was narrowly evading
